

On 12 August AD 117, Trajan's freedman and personal servant, the twenty-eight-year-old Marcus Ulpius Phaedimus, died in Selinus in Cilicia just a few days after his master and within a day of Hadrian receiving the news of Trajan's death. This coincidence only deepened the mystery surrounding the circumstances of Hadrian's adoption.

Phaedimus, who had presumably travelled with Trajan throughout the East, was at Selinus with the imperial's entourage when they were put ashore at the harbour of Selinus due to the worsening health condition of the emperor (see [here](#)). A funerary epitaph discovered in modern times in Rome (CIL VI 1884) and now in the Lapidary Gallery of the Vatican Museums, records Phaedimus' offices as the emperor's table and wine cabinet chief as well as personal attendant and secretary.

Latin transcript: M(arco) Ulpio Aug(usti) lib(erto) Phaedimo / divi Traiani Aug(usti) a potione / item a laguna et tricliniarch(a) / lictori proximo et a comment(ariis) beneficiorum vixit ann(os) XXVIII / abscessit Selinunte pri(die) Idus Augus(tas) / Nigro et Aproniano co(n)s(ulibus) / reliquiae treiectae eius III Nonas Febr(uarias) ex permissu / collegii pontific(um) piaculo facto / Catullino et Apro co(n)s(ulibus) / dulcissimae memoriae eius / Valens Aug(usti) lib(ertus) Phaedimianus / a veste ben(e)mer(enti) fecit



From Rome, Year 130 AD

Wall 37, position 44 - Cat. 6961 - Vatican Museums

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Translation: To [the memory of] Marcus Ulpus Phaedimus, imperial freedman, sommelier and head butler of the deified Trajan; chief *lictor* [official attendant of senior Roman officeholders] and secretary for grants and promotions. He lived for twenty-eight years and died at Selinus on August 12 in the consulships of Niger and Apronianus [AD 117]. His remains were removed [to Rome, where the epitaph was found] by permission of the College of Pontiffs after an atonement sacrifice had been made in the consulships of Catullinus and Aper [AD 130].

The epitaph provides us with important information regarding the exact date of Phaedimus' death which occurred on August 12 in the consulships of Niger and Apronianus, that is to say in the year 117 (see the list of consuls known to have held office in the 2nd century AD [here](#)). The inscription also tells us that his remains were brought to Rome twelve years later on 3rd February in the consulships of Catullinus and Aper, in AD 130. His remains were transferred to Rome and buried by his fellow freedman (*collibertus*) Valens Phaedimianus whose name shows that he had been a slave of Phaedimus before passing into the ownership of the emperor as wardrobe-keeper (*veste*).

Many questions arise from what we learn on this epitaph. Why did it take twelve years before his body was taken back to Rome? Was it a coincidence that Phaedimus died one day after Hadrian received the announcement of Trajan's death? Did Phaedimus die of the same infection that killed his master, Trajan? Were they both poisoned? Did he commit suicide out of grief, or was he silenced by Hadrian's entourage?

These details have encouraged sceptical scholars to support the doubts raised by several ancient writers regarding the authenticity of Hadrian's adoption by Trajan. Some scholars argued that Phaedimus had learned somehow that Trajan had died without adopting Hadrian or even that he had been assassinated and that the inconvenient witness had therefore been murdered by Plotina and Attianus in case he would say too much.

A more rational explanation suggested that Phaedimus was not killed but, rather, died of the same disease that Trajan contracted in the East. However, it does not explain why his remains were not taken back to Rome until AD 130.

According to the Vatican website, there are two other known exemplars of the epigraph.

Sources & references:

- Epitaph of a lictor – Vatican Museums Cat. 6961 ([link](#))
- E. Mary Smallwood, Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian, 176.
- Birley, Anthony R. (1997). Hadrian. The restless emperor (p. 80)
- Everitt, Anthony (2009). Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome (p. 166-7)



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